

## Exploring the world anew

Expeditions touted as modern intelligence gathering

By Sophia Maines

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Satellites and secrets aren't enough to win America's battles, according to Kansas University professor Jerome Dobson.

"The classified intelligence approach that has been in vogue since 1947 has failed," he said. "We've ended up with a government that values secret information, satellite information and physical knowledge about places but is very poor in terms of culture, politics and human/land relationships. The old way has failed."

Dobson, geography professor and president of the American Geographical Society, believes the United States needs to use another way to understand the world. And, for \$125 million, the United States can get started on a new track.

Dobson's idea — called the Bowman Expeditions — would have geographers and graduate students canvass the globe, gathering intelligence that can inform the government and the public about the world.

In the process, the Expeditions also would help revive the stature of the oft-marginalized academic discipline of geography.

### **Mexico prototype**

The prototype for the Bowman Expeditions already is under way in the remote regions of Mexico.

Dobson and KU geography associate professor Peter Herlihy are leading a project to explore property changes in the rural areas of Mexico.

The research is supported by more than \$500,000 from the Department of Defense through the Foreign Studies Office at Fort Leavenworth. It involves researchers from KU, Kansas State and institutions in Canada and Mexico.

The teams are tracing the transfer of property from communal "ejido" lands to private property, a process legalized by a change in the Mexican Constitution in 1992.

Herlihy believes the PROCEDE, the Program for Certification of Ejidal Rights and Titling of Urban Patios, has caused a silent revolution.

“I would say this is the most significant land tenure change in any Latin American country since colonial times,” he said.

Some view it differently.

The move legalized a process that already was under way in complicated and illegal ways, said Mauricio Tenorio, history professor and acting director of the Katz Center for Mexican Studies at the University of Chicago.

“I don’t think it has changed much that would not have otherwise changed,” Tenorio said.

Many people don’t understand what exactly is taking place or what it means, Herlihy said.

The researchers have traveled to La Huasteca and Oaxaca. They have taught the residents cartography and used their knowledge to develop maps of the area. They’re gathering information about property, demographics and who buys and who sells each parcel of land.

They share what they gather with the residents, but Herlihy also sees other uses for the information. Much of the ejido land is forested, he said, thus the fate of the land has implications for environmental conservation. And the land changes also affect immigration, he said.

The Kansas City nonprofit SmartPort Inc. is pressing ahead with plans to turn Kansas City into an inland port for shipments from Mexico, allowing goods to pass over the Mexican border freely and to go through customs in Kansas City.

Herlihy said the research in Mexico also can benefit SmartPort planners by offering information about the areas along the Mexican railway.

“They can take this information and use it for all kinds of things to really understand what they call the cultural terrain,” Herlihy said. “You can’t even predict all the uses.”

## **Geography**

Dobson named the Bowman Expeditions for Isaiah Bowman, geographer to Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt and former director of the American Geographical Society.

Geography once enjoyed a more respected place in American society, Dobson said. But school programs and understanding of geography have dwindled following World War II.

“If there is any discipline that has undergone a purge in the last half century, it is geography,” he said.

Harvard University closed its geography program in 1948, and many Ivy League schools followed suit. The only Ivy League school to offer an undergraduate degree in geography today is Dartmouth.

“We squandered an essential component of our educational system when we got rid of geography,” Dobson said. “It dug us into a whole. It’s going to take a while to get back out.”

Dobson believes concerns about the geographic ignorance of many, from high school students who can’t find Iraq on a map to the government, is partly a product of the sidelining of his discipline.

Geoff Demarest, bureau Americas analyst in the Foreign Military Studies Office at Fort Leavenworth, said he hopes to see more projects like the one in Mexico. And a second team is planned to conduct research in the Antilles.

“We live in a world where we’re now admitting that the knowledge base upon which the government makes decisions could be improved,” Demarest said.

If emphasis on the discipline is cyclical, geography is enjoying a growth time, said Richard Wright, an endowed professor of geography and public affairs at Dartmouth.

Wright pointed to the recent launch of the Center for Geographical Analysis at Harvard and growth in the number of faculty and students in his own department.

“We’re not a mainstream discipline,” he said. “That marginality means we have a smaller voice. But it doesn’t mean that that voice isn’t there. It doesn’t mean if we shout we can’t be heard.”

KU’s geography department has 21 faculty and is growing. In 2003, the department combined with the atmospheric science program, which focuses on weather and climate change, once housed in the physics and astronomy department.

The broad discipline encompasses human and physical geography as well as techniques in geography, such as geographic information systems.